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ABSTRACT

Research findings concerning early parent/infant interaction are presented to counter prevalent myths concerning the nature of babies. The myth of the passive infant is counterposed to research findings on the attempts of the infant to evoke from caretakers the attention it needs for its development. Special attention is given to the topics of infant crying and the effects of parental responsiveness to crying. Concluding sections of the paper discuss the development of communication skills in babies, the types of cries voiced by young infants, and the relationship between crying and child abuse. (Author/RH)

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Selected Papers

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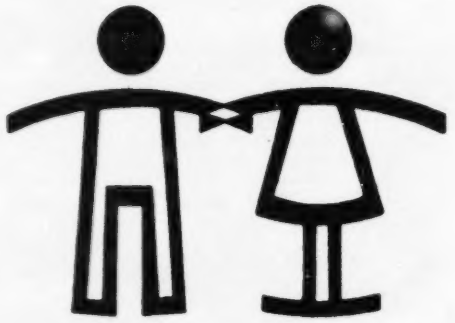

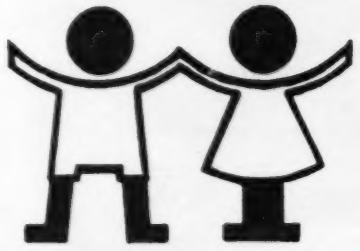

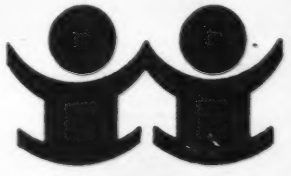

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PARENTAL RESPONSIVENESS TO CHILDREN

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PARENTAL RESPONSIVENESS TO CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to give some answers to questions relating to some of the very earliest interactions between parents and infants. How early does infant communication begin? Is there pre-speech communication? What is the role of cying and smiling for the infant? How do infants and parents influence each other's behaviour? Is it important to respond quickly when a baby cries?

Many different viewpoints exist about the best,or most appropriate ways to deal with babies, and as is well known, fashions in child-rearing change from time to time and place to place. Our values about child rearing are determined by a multiplicity of factors. Quite often these beliefs are influenced more than we realize by all sorts of forces outside ourselves (e.g. by the media, by our neighbours, by the social class we belong to, and, perhaps most particularly, by our own parents and the way we ourselves were brought up). We probably model ourselves more than we realize on our own parents - unless, of course, we are particularly aware of something we are critical of them for, and then we may bend over backwards to do things differently. But this may take considerable conscious effort! In the field of child abuse, for example, there is some evidence to suggest that parents who themselves have undergone a great deal of harsh physical punishment at the hands of their parents, are more likely to physically abuse their own children.

Quite often, people's values about child-rearing are based on myths concerning the nature of babies, rather than on research evidence. In this paper I am attempting, as far as possible, to present research evidence relating to early parent/infant interactions, and to let you work out for yourselves where these findings may fit into your values about child-rearing.

EXPRESSIVENESS IN YOUNG BABIES

One of the myths most frequently held is the myth of the baby as a vegetable - that is, the view that the baby is a *passive* creature just waiting to be shaped and influenced by its environment for better or worse. The newborn baby may look as though it just sleeps and eats, but from the earliest days, we are now beginning to realize that it is equipped to respond to specific aspects of its environment in all sorts of complex ways, and, in fact, to actually *evoke* the sort of attention from the people around it which it needs for its development.

Psychologists have recently studied such things as crying, the infant's gazing at the caretaker, and the smiling and vocalizations of the baby, and have investigated the ways in which these markedly influence the behaviour of the adults caring for him/her.

Psychologists used to think that babies could make very little sense out of the confusion of their visual world. But recent experiments with very young infants (around six weeks of age) indicate that during their waking periods they will spend much more time looking at a diagram of a human face, than at a similar diagram with scrambled features (Fantz, 1963). They are probably pre-programmed to find the human face very interesting to look at.

The intent gazing at the mother's face, which is typical of every very young infant, often provokes her to talk to the infant in an animated way, and to give him/her more attention than she would if the baby's eyes were averted. Already the infant's behaviour may have an effect on the way the mother communicates with him/her.

It has also been observed (by filming and analyzing the details of behaviour) that babies, as early as eight weeks old, respond very differently to *objects* and to *people* (Trevarthen, 1975). When a toy is dangled in front of the baby, arm and leg movements are more prevalent, whereas lip and tongue movements are more apparent when the mother talks to the baby at close range. *It is thought* that this is the beginnings of learning to communicate, even though the use of speech to name objects and relate experiences will not occur for perhaps nine to eighteen months later. *It is also thought* that, to some extent, infant behaviour itself may control the early pre-speech interactions between mother and child. It has been observed by Trevarthen that when the baby is awake and alert, and expressing excitement or smiling, that this gains very close attention from the mother - she will usually talk to the baby in an animated way, and this sustains the social sequence.

Mothers also simplify their speech and often imitate back to the baby the sounds he/she is making. Babies experiment with a variety of vocalizations - cooing, bubble blowing, and bubbling - during which they make a great variety of sounds. In fact, analysis of babies' very early speech, indicates that they make all the sounds used in almost every human language. But, by the time they are about six months old, they have already begun to be more selective and begin to babble only in the sounds of their own language. It is now believed that it is the mother imitating the infant's sounds back to him/her which has this effect - so that the sounds which he/she never hears tend to disappear from his/her babbling repertoire. Mothers usually time their talking in bursts and pauses, which let the baby "have a say" also, so that even in this early "pre-speech" the *alternations* of human communication are being learned.

One experiment was carried out (Trevarthen, 1975) where mothers were asked to intentionally withhold their normal response to the infant, and to remain with a blank face when the baby was vocalizing. The infants were observed to become "puzzled", to make exaggerated efforts to regain the mother's attention, and finally to become "dejected". This apparently disturbed the animated reactions involved in the normal mother and baby interactions.

It is possible that deficiency of *responsiveness* or *expression* on either the part of the mother or the baby could exert disrupting effects on this pre-speech relationship.

Mothers who have difficulty relating to their babies early on, sometimes comment that the baby never looks at them, or does not respond in the way they expect. They may often go on to assume that they baby doesn't "like" them or "love" them, particularly if it cries a lot of the time. Many unfounded assumptions are made by parents about what they assume to be quite complex motives in very young babies. Babies are often labelled "good" or "naughty" as though they have deliberate and complex intentions, when they are behaving the only way they know how. This often applies to a baby's crying. Similarly,

when we are talking here of a baby *evoking* parental responses, we are talking more about "instinctive" behaviour patterns a baby has, rather than deliberate or complex motives on his/her part.

INFANT CRYING

I want now to deal in more detail with crying, since it is one of the areas parents have to make a lot of decisions about in the very early life of the child, and many psychologists believe it to be an important forerunner of communication.

It is, of course, the very first way a baby has to communicate his or her feelings. But in the earliest months it is in no way a deliberate act of communication on the part of the baby - it just happens instinctively whenever he/she is not feeling in a comfortable or quiescent state.

It has been argued (Bowlby, 1969) that since human babies are very dependent at birth - more so than any other animal species - nature has seen to it that they have a way of maintaining close contact with their caretakers. Since they are, themselves, not mobile enough in infancy to approach the mother, or to cling the way some animals can, it is suggested that they are genetically programmed to *cry* when out of contact or distressed. Because crying is such an unpleasant or distressing sound to most adults, it is usually very effective in provoking the mother or caregiver to come to the baby. So that in the earliest stages of a child's life, crying is a very vital "signalling" behaviour which helps the baby keep contact with its caregivers.

Gradually the baby's repertoire is supplemented with various other skills such as smiling, gestures, laughing and the types of vocalizing mentioned earlier. By the time children are 9-12 months old, they can usually *directly* overcome the problem of the distance between themselves and their mothers by taking a more active approach - that of crawling or even walking. By this time, too, they have the capacity to make a variety of sounds, grunts, and sometimes even words. They can more directly make their mothers take notice of themselves and their needs in a whole variety of ways - pointing, tugging, handing her objects, and so on. So that by the later part of their first year, crying should have become less necessary to the children, since there is a much wider range of communication skills available to them. And, typically, this is what we find - as development proceeds, crying becomes much less frequent than at the beginning of an infant's life.

Crying is, however, an issue on which there have been many pronouncements for parents. They have been told that "It's good for a child to cry, it develops their lungs". From about the 1920's to the 1940's (when routines were vital, and feeding by the clock was "in") mothers were advised not to pick up a baby between feeds or they would have a "spoilt" child, a tyrant whose demands would make a slave of the mother.

SOME EFFECTS OF PARENTAL RESPONSIVENESS TO CRYING

Although more recently parents have been advised to follow their own inclinations in responding to crying, there still persists the view in some quarters that responding to the crying child will make it more probable that the child will cry more often. This is based on the premise that whenever any behaviour is rewarded it will become more common; and whatever behaviour is

ignored or punished its frequency diminishes. While this is basically true with regard to many behaviours when *alternative* ways of acting are available, it does not seem to be true of babies' early crying because at this stage they do not have other behavioural options open to them. Yet many parents have been hesitant to respond to a young baby's crying on these grounds.

A classic research study on infant crying (Bell & Ainsworth, 1972) has looked at this very question of what happens to the frequency of crying when a mother responds fairly rapidly to a young baby's cries, and what happens if she takes a long time to respond, or ignores them altogether. These researchers studied a group of babies and mothers throughout their first year together. One of the first things they found in this study is that both among the babies and the mothers there were great variations in behaviour. Babies differ enormously from one to another in the amount they cry; some babies seem to be more irritable and less easily pacified than others; other babies seem very placid. This variation is quite marked in the first few months of life, though the babies tended to become more similar to each other with time, and for all babies, the duration of crying diminished throughout the first year.

In the group of mothers, wide differences in responsiveness were also found - the most responsive mother ignored the crying only 4% of the time, while the least responsive ignored the crying 97% of the time. (This wide variation in behaviour was probably due to some of those beliefs and values regarding appropriate ways to rear babies which were spoken of earlier.) These mothers showed consistent behaviour over the whole of the first year - either tending to be responsive or not responsive all the way through.

Well, which proved the better method? Did the mothers who responded rapidly "spoil" their babies or actually encourage them to cry more? No, in fact, the reverse was found to be the case. Those mothers who responded rapidly in the first few months actually were the ones whose babies cried significantly *less* in the second half of their first year.

They found that from about four months onwards, those babies whose crying had been ignored earlier tended to cry more, and to become more insistent in their crying.

So, it seems from this research, that mothers who ignore and delay in responding to the crying of an infant when he/she is tiny, have babies who cry more frequently and persistently later on - which, in turn, seems to further discourage the mother from responding promptly and results in further infant irritability, thus setting up a vicious cycle.

Observations from this study suggest that mothers who promptly heed their infant's cries are also more sensitively responsive to other signals as well. The more responsive the mother is to the variety of signals the child is gradually able to use to elicit her attention (such as smiling, cooing, babbling, etc.) the less likely he/she is to cry, and the more likely he/she is to develop more varied ways of communicating with her. So there we see that the responsive mother is helping to increase the child's range of communication skills by rewarding him/her when he/she uses them, rather than waiting *until* he/she cries before giving him/her any attention.

Of course, the way life is organized for many mothers and babies in our society doesn't always allow for the mother to be conveniently close by and responsive to the infants's needs. The demands and pressures of our society contrast markedly, for example, with a number of primitive tribes where life is often set up in a way which allows infant's needs to be responded to very promptly - sometimes by an extended family of multiple caretakers.

It was found in the Botswana society, for example, that babies hardly ever cried. They were carried in a sling close to the mother's body, and it was suggested that they rarely cried because the mothers could anticipate hunger by observing and interpreting more subtle cues preliminary to the stage of crying, such as bodily movements, facial expressions like grimacing before crying, sucking movements of the lips, and so on). A cry was regarded as a real emergency signal and responded to very rapidly. Many primitive societies organize their child-rearing to ensure that the infant has relatively continuous contact with the mother. In our western societies,however, there is much greater separation between baby and mother, often beginning in the hospital, seen in early weaning and infrequent feedings, and the prevalence of cots, playpens and other devices which maintain the baby at a distance, and often out of sight of the mother. There is also a much greater prevalence of crying.

LATER DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN BABIES

Perhaps one has to raise questions about whether it is always desirable for the baby to have all its needs promptly satisfied. I think the distinction needs to be made quite clearly here between the effects of responding to the cry in early infancy, and responding to the crying of an older baby. As stated already, the cry in early infancy functions more like a distress signal, expressing some sort of need state such as hunger, discomfort, or being out of contact with others. It has been found that very young babies cry less often when the mother is nearby, than when she is out of sight - in fact, three times as much crying occurs when she is not in sight. However, older infants are more likely to cry when the mother is actually present. So, towards the end of the first year, crying becomes a more intentional way for the child to influence its environment and the people in it, many of whom would prefer that he/she used more acceptable ways. He/she now has a much greater range of communication skills, only one of which is crying, and it is probably at this stage (rather than earlier) thata parent may be much more successful in quite deliberately reinforcing (or rewarding) some other kinds of communication such as words or gestures, and *not* rewarding crying.

One of the problems here is that a child's quieter and less obvious attempts to communicate may go unnoticed by a busy parent, whereas wingeing or crying almost always get noticed sooner or later. Even if it gets noticed with cross words or a smack, sometimes getting noticed is better than being ignored, no matter what form it takes! The general point here, is that an alert or sensitive parent can actually foster other means of communication, and reduce the incidence of crying as the principal means. It is quite a common behaviour for parents to ignore the crying of a young baby for a while in the hope that it will just stop. Sometimes it does. But, very often, the crying goes on long enough,and becomes irritating enough, to wear down the parents' resistance and so they finally go in to the child. Now this is much more likely to give the child the message that if he keeps on crying *long enough*, they will come, and is, in fact, reinforcing or rewarding *lengthy* crying. (This same principle has been observed in animal experiments, where animals which have been rewarded only every now and then for a certain kind of behaviour will become very *persistent* in this behaviour, presumably in hopes of being rewarded again.) Experimental pigeons have been known to peck away at a lever consistently for hours because they got rewarded with a food pellet about every thousand pecks! The same applies with babies - they may learn to cry for hours if, after a long period of crying, someone finally goes in and gives them attention. Once such a pattern becomes established it can be very difficult to extinguish.

Bell and Ainsworth concluded from their research that infants whose mothers have given them relatively more tender and affectionate holding in the earliest months of life, are content with surprisingly little physical contact by the end of the first year - although they enjoy being held, when put down they are happy to move off into independent exploratory play. We sometimes see extreme clingyness and apparently great need for physical contact in institutionalized children. They may appear to be extremely friendly, loving and hugging almost indiscriminately any new adult who arrives on the scene - perhaps reflecting some of their earlier deprivation. In extremely deprived situations (such as some of these institutions were in much earlier and less enlightened times), there was relatively little human contact of a physical, cuddling kind, and babies' crying was rarely responded to. Here it was found that babies eventually became quiet, crying very little, but also apathetic and somewhat retarded in overall development, particularly in the area of language.

TYPES OF CRIES

The question has been asked as to whether there are different types of cries and whether the mother can really tell the cause of the infant's crying by the type of cry. The evidence for this is mixed. It may become easier later in the first year. Analysis of the voice patterns of young infants has distinguished three different patterns of crying in babies - a hunger cry, an anger cry and a pain cry. The features of the pain cry are its suddenness of onset, its loudness, and an extended period of breath holding after the first cry. This was in comparison with the hunger cry which had a more gradual onset. The anger cry was very similar to the hunger cry, but with more effort put into it. Hunger cries, when left a long time unattended, began to resemble pain cries. So that basically these cries differed in intensity rather than anything else, and the mother's interpretation of the type of cry is probably based not only on what she hears, but on the context - perhaps guesswork relating to the time since the baby was last fed, time of day, and other such clues in the environment.

CRYING AND CHILD ABUSE

The cry of a baby has a very *compelling* effect on its listeners, producing in most humans a feeling of distress, or at least strong emotion. It is one of the loudest and most intense sounds humans ever make. In the majority of cases, it evokes nurturant and caring responses from adults. But incessant crying can produce irritation and anger as well. Nurses in maternity wards have reported that the cries of some babies in particular can be experienced as more irritating than others.

It has been found that crying is *one* of the major causes of child abuse and battering in children under twelve months. In one study of abused infants, excessive crying was given as the reason by 80% of the parents. Psychologists have suggested that excessive crying (probably due to this pattern of non-response by adults leading to a greater intensity of crying on the part of the baby) may result in a maladaptive response to the unpleasant stimulus of the cry. Prolonged crying may just become too much for parents to tolerate, though their capacity to cope with it may also be influenced by other problems occurring in their own environment at the same time - such as lack of emotional support as in the case of single parents, economic hardship or other frustrations. Not unimportant here, also, is the way parents interpret the crying.

In some cases it has been found that abusing parents attribute very complex motives to babies - believing that crying is a sign that the baby doesn't love them, is trying to be "naughty", or is "ungrateful" to them. Speaking more generally, parents' attitudes may be characterised as being either "for" or "against" the crying baby (that is, sympathetic to crying or not). Crying is sometimes interpreted as a deliberate attempt to manipulate the parent, and the response may then be anger, irritation and even punishment. Or, by ignoring the cry, parents may believe they are discouraging the child's dependency and increasing his self-reliance. Reports that abusing parents tend to hold extreme views about fear of "spoiling", and independence training, also suggests that their parenting techniques may *foster* the excessive crying often given as the reason for abuse - and, as mentioned earlier, this can be a perpetuation of attitudes and treatment they themselves received as children.

There is, however, some research which suggests that babies who are abused may be especially difficult constitutionally (right from birth), and may enormously frustrate the parents' attempt to pacify, nurture, or respond to them, thus, themselves contributing to the abusive behaviour. Child abuse is, however, a much more complex field than these few brief comments indicate.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the first year of a baby's life is a very important period when he/she may, through sensitive nurturing techniques, come to develop a sense of basic trust in the world, and may come to view his environment as predictable and consistent. Feelings of self-regard are very likely laid down in this early period. The child whose needs are only inconsistently met by the caretakers in his/her environment may, on the other hand, become distrusting and depressed, developing attitudes that his/her own actions seem to play little part in what happens to him/her. Researchers working more recently on experiments with consistently non-rewarded animals (i.e., those who are not getting consistent feedback by reward as to which of their actions "pay off" in an experimental situation) have observed what they refer to as "learned helplessness" (Seligman, 1975) in these animals, when the animals tend to give up trying. There may be some parallels in this with humans.

Maternal responsiveness to a child's signals appears to foster the development of communication, and of a sense of increased competence - it may positively encourage the later development of an understanding of the relationship of means and ends.

Based on a lecture presented at the Royal Hospital for Women, Paddington, under the auspices of that hospital and the Unit for Child Studies, University of N.S.W. 30th March, 1981.

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